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ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities throughout the United States are faced with the new mission of offering comprehensive educational programs designed to strengthen the employment skills of mature adults. In the coming decades, as the number of young people entering the labor force decreases by an expected one-third, the number of available workers aged 45-54 will increase from 10% to 16%. Rapid changes in technology have made such older workers vulnerable to job loss and prolonged unemployment. At the same time, labor shortages are predicted in high technology jobs and the service industries of insurance, banking, health and human services. Because 48% of the work force is employed in organizations with fewer than 500 employees which lack the resources to provide their own retraining programs, community colleges are the country's most important source of such retraining. As the pool of younger students shrinks, community colleges can allocate more of their resources to the education of older adults. The key components of older worker training programs include: (1) practical employment skills for mature adults; (2) responsiveness to the specific personnel needs of regional employers; (3) explicit performance objectives; (4) outreach to stimulate enrollment and ongoing vocational counseling; (5) sensitivity to the special needs of mature students, with an emphasis on short-term training that leads quickly to jobs or improved on-the-job performance; and (6) placement services. A distinct administrative unit run by a program developer with a gerontological perspective is essential to such a program. Examples of several successful programs and a bibliography are included. (JSP)

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OLDER WORKER RETRAINING:

AN IMPORTANT NEW DIRECTION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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Overview

Colleges and universities throughout the United States should take on an important new mission, that of offering comprehensive educational programs to strengthen employment skills of mature adults. In this paper, we show why the United States can expect increased labor force participation from mature adults, why greater emphasis on employment training is needed throughout work life, and why institutions of higher education have a major role to play in providing older worker training. We also identify and illustrate the major components needed in effective training programs for older workers.

Background

Three intersecting trends point to a need for greater labor force participation among mature adults. These trends also invite questions about the role of educational institutions in retraining an older work force:

1) In the coming decades, the proportion of young people expected to enter the labor force will drop by one third. Among available workers, the percentage who are 25 to 34 years of age is projected to drop from 19 percent in 1986 to 16 percent by the year 2000. At the same time, the proportion of available workers aged 45 to 54, the population most threatened by technological change, will increase from 10 percent to 16 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983);

2) Rapid changes in technology and the growing importance of global economic forces have made older workers in the United States and in Western Europe vulnerable to job loss and to prolonged unemployment in their later years. Even workers in their forties are at risk of discovering that their work skills are obsolete. The massive personnel cuts in electronic and high technology industries since 1985 provide evidence of the severity of the problem since middle-management, middle-aged workers bear the brunt of the cuts; and

3) Prior to the current recession, shortages of workers were increasingly troubling for several years, not only in high technology jobs but in the service industries of insurance, banking, health, and human services. When the economy recovers, these labor shortages can be expected to reappear. Despite these shortages, the labor-force participation of males over 55 years of age declined substantially during a 20 year period between the mid 1960s and mid 1980s (USDL, 1991). In the past several years, labor-force participation of older males has stabilized. The reasons for the very recent upturn in labor force participation of older men are uncertain.

This set of trends invites:

1) reconsideration of the nation's ideas about labor-force participation of mature people and

2) serious examination of occupational education for mature adults.

Labor-Force Participation of Older People

Until recently, the trend toward earlier retirement was widely viewed as a boon bestowed by modern technology and economic life. National prosperity promised to place within almost everyone's reach a shortened working life and retirement years of financial and physical security. These later years have been seen as essentially private -- years in which individuals could seek ways to enjoy their leisure, to explore the world in travel, to return to the family life of their children and grandchildren, or to enrich themselves personally through study and hobbies. By and large it was assumed by scholars and others that the major challenge was how elders would use these "golden" years in which they had no clear social responsibilities or productive economic roles.

For a long time, this view of the role of the elderly was buttressed by the conviction that technology makes much labor redundant, that goods sufficient to meet the demands of a growing population and of constantly rising consumer expectations can be produced with less labor; and that aging itself calls for withdrawal and life reassessment -- the disengagement theory advanced by Cumming (1961). In traditional economic research on aging, the customary approach has been to describe and explain why it is inevitable that the elderly will withdraw from the labor market, how their labor is replaced by others, and how the elderly become a significant consumer factor in marketing goods.

It is true that some people welcome retirement as an opportunity to concentrate on the cultural and humanizing uses of leisure through study. Educational programs such as elder hostels have been formed to serve these ends. Gradually in the past two decades, as student enrollments began to decline, many colleges and universities began to welcome older students to liberal arts and continuing education courses. Higher education, therefore, has been responsive to this opportunity to serve older people.

But a number of developments since 1980 invite a rethinking of societal views about retirement. The United States's changing economic picture and long-continued growth have begun to produce unavoidable contradictions. When many industries were forced to cut back their labor force, older workers were the first to go. Economic analyses indicated that this retrenchment policy had high costs in labor turnover and in the retraining required for a young, unskilled labor replacement (Bergman, Naegle, & Tokarski, 1986). At the same time, newly generated jobs in the service industries (finance, banking, insurance, food service, and retailing) were becoming difficult to fill and labor shortages of a serious nature emerged (Rothstein, 1988). The end of the post-World War II

baby boom led to concern about a growing dependency ratio, that is, an increasing proportion of old and young to be supported by those in the traditional working years (Chen, 1988; Sandell, 1987).

During this same time, studies of the intellectual and physical health of older people established that many people remain capable of leading active lives until they are well into their eighties. Until then, their intellectual and physical capacities may be slowed, but older people retain the ability to be contributing members of society (Peterson & Coberly, 1988; Sheppard, 1976; Chen, 1988; Neugarten, 1976).

Recent evidence indicates that many older people do not accept the prevailing retirement patterns which carry the implication that 25 percent to 30 percent of their adult lives should be lived without working. It is now common for people to take new jobs after retiring. The term "bridge jobs" has been introduced to describe positions that older people hold during the period between departure from "career jobs" and retirement (Doeringer, 1990). (Career jobs are positions held for the longest period of an individual's work life.) For approximately one third of all workers, career jobs end by age 55, and for one half, by age 60 (Ruhm, 1990). The vast majority who leave career jobs "early" seek bridge jobs after a period of retirement. Some seek part-time and temporary positions as bridge jobs. These directions that these reentries into the labor force have taken are varied. Some drift back to their old employer often requesting part-time work. Particularly interesting are instances in which mature adults create their own jobs by starting their own businesses.

The extent of interest in employment among older people who do not hold paid jobs has also been underestimated. A representative national survey conducted by Louis Harris for the Commonwealth Fund found that of the estimated 8.1 million men ages 55-64 and women ages 50-59 who were not working, 1.1

million were willing to work and passed a numbers of tests proving their work commitment and ability to work (McNaught et al, 1991).

In recent years, a few firms have developed special programs to employ older people and have been highly satisfied with the results. Three successful examples have recently been examined in a study by ICF, Inc. for the Commonwealth Fund (Barth, 1991b). Days Inns has actively recruited people over 50 years of age as reservation agents in Atlanta and Knoxville. Days Inns found that older people could be trained successfully to operate sophisticated computer software, that older workers stayed on the job longer than younger workers, and that older workers were more successful in "selling" reservations than were younger workers. In Hartford, The Travelers Insurance Company has set up its own temporary service that includes over 700 retirees. In a typical week, 250 retirees fill positions. The firm realizes savings of between four and nine dollars per hour when it hires through its own pool rather than through independent agencies. In 1989, the savings were estimated at $871,000. In Great Britain, B&Q plc, a major hardware chain opened two new stores staffed entirely by workers over 50 years of age. Compared to several other branches, these stores experienced lower turnover, lower absenteeism, greater willingness of staff to work overtime, and greater profitability. If more firms were to be receptive to hiring from the large pool of available older workers, a substantial increase in the labor force participation of older people could be anticipated.

A New Role for Higher Education

A number of factors lead to the conclusion that higher education should assume a major role in providing employment training for mature adults. Because of technological advances in work settings and economic instability that forces workers to make periodic job changes, occupational education is now important for people throughout their working lives. Workers must continuously upgrade their

skills to remain competitive in their current positions. To obtain new jobs in growth sectors, working people also need retraining to acquire new job skills.

Occupational education is now conspicuously important in training workers of all ages on new computer technologies. In light of the growth of the service economy, occupational education may also make a significant contribution in training workers to be effective in dealing with the public.

Occupational education can also contribute by certifying the employability of older workers who are seeking to enter new fields or who have been out of the workforce for extended periods. By successfully completing an occupational education program, students demonstrate that they are motivated, are able to learn new skills, have good work habits, and can get along well in a formal organizational setting. Successful completion of an occupational program can be particularly valuable for older people who must overcome employer prejudices against older workers.

A number of organizations have recently called attention to the need for stronger occupational education in the United States. These include the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, the National Center on Education and the Economy (Bailey, 1989, Berryman, 1988, and Vaughan & Berryman, 1989), the American Council on Education, the National Governors Association, the College Board, and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (1989), the Committee for Economic Development (1990), and the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching (Eurich, 1990). Most of these organizations emphasize occupational education in the early working years. However, the Committee for Economic Development (CED) is notable among them in calling for a life-cycle approach to occupational education.

Institutions of higher education can play a major role in providing the

occupational education for mature adults that is needed. While some major industries operate significant training programs of their own, most working adults have to look elsewhere for retraining. Eurich (1990) points out that 48 percent of the work force is employed in organizations with fewer than 500 employees. These small organizations tend to lack the resources needed to provide their own training. Small organizations are particularly important for the economy because they are expected to be the major sources of job growth. To the extent that employers do not provide the training needed, institutions of higher education are major alternatives.

Colleges and universities have capabilities that can be adapted for employment training of mature adults. Universities have extensive experience in providing preparation for entry into the professions. Some continuing education courses are explicitly designed to upgrade professional skills. These occupationally oriented continuing education courses, now offered primarily to younger workers, can be adapted to meet the retraining needs of mature workers.

However, community colleges appear to be the country's most important resource for employment training of mature adults. Because community colleges are numerous and widely dispersed, most people live close to one. Occupational education is already emphasized in these settings. Half of community college enrollment is in nondegree programs usually designed to lead directly to jobs (Eurich, 1990). Community colleges are economically accessible; their tuition is typically half that of public four-year colleges. They are also particularly important in serving economically disadvantaged groups, including women and minorities (Eurich, 1990). Community colleges also tend to have experience in working closely with area employers and many have the capability of mounting special employment training programs to meet the needs of employers.

The changing demographic profile of the country also provides institutions of higher education with reason to develop more programs to serve mature adults. The shrinking pool of young people of traditional college age will mean excess capacity for many institutions unless they substantially broaden their markets. As indicated above, many colleges already offer expressive and self-help courses to older learners. Many also encourage enrollment of older people on a space-available basis in liberal arts courses. Occupational education for mature workers can be a significant new market for many institutions.

On a scattered basis, some institutions of higher education already offer older worker training programs. The following are examples:

- At Westchester Community College (NY), the Center for a Mature Workforce currently offers older adults vocational training in three distinct training programs: customer service, substitute teaching, and clerical skills. (In time, the Center expects to offer additional training programs.) The Center's vocationally-oriented training programs are an outgrowth of the College's Mainstream program that previously emphasized personal enrichment classes for retired people.

  Particularly distinctive is the Customer Service program whose curriculum includes basic office skills, computer skills, and customer service (Barth, 1991a). The program was developed with a major insurance company, Mutual of New York, is subsidized by the company, and the curriculum includes an experience in applying skills in the corporate office. The program involves 140 hours of training over a 14 week period. Enrollment is limited to 20 students. In the most recent program cycle, all students were over 50 years of age. The program does not provide academic credit; however, graduates receive a certificate.

- At the University of Massachusetts at Boston, a Gerontology Certificate program is designed to strengthen the ability of older people to play productive roles in aging service and advocacy. Although open to people of all ages, the vast majority are over 60 years of age. The curriculum includes courses in social, psychological, demographic, and economic aspects of aging, human services, the legislative process, and action research. Between 50 and 60 students complete the program each year. Students receive

both a certificate and academic credit. Well established, the program is in its second decade. Many graduates are active in the aging service/advocacy arena as part-time employees, volunteers, and stipend recipients. The program is entirely state funded.

- Grand Rapids (MI) Community College offers a cooperative skilled Job training program for economically vulnerable people over 55 years of age (Riekse, 1991). The college offers the program in collaboration with a senior employment program offered by the regional area agency on aging. Funding which comes through the federal Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) limits enrollment to 25 and restricts eligibility to low-income people. (JTPA legislation sets aside 3 percent of available funds for older worker training.) Course options are computer-based office procedures, computer-aided design/ computer-aided manufacturing, furniture manufacturing, furniture finishing, and building maintenance mechanics. All of the courses are designed to open doors to skill-based jobs with a future. Heavy emphasis is placed on outreach to recruit students. The senior employment program carries major responsibility for job search and job placement.

Key Program Components

The fact that a number of viable programs are under way is suggestive of the potential for growth and replication in older worker training. The experiences of the established programs provide valuable lessons for other institutions in developing new programs. The following are key components of older worker training programs:

A. Focus on employment skills for mature adults. Programs should emphasize practical skills that will enable graduates to qualify for new jobs or increase their productivity in existing jobs. They should be concerned with skills ranging from those required for entry-level positions to those needed by managers, technical workers, and professionals who need to keep pace with developments in their fields. Each of the programs illustrated here emphasizes entry-level skills. However, the courses on computer application for offices are also highly pertinent for professionals in the many fields in which micro computers have become basic tools.

Also pertinent are programs that strengthen the ability of older people to make contributions in community service volunteering. Some educational programs may specifically prepare older people for part-time roles with community service organizations in which compensation is in the form of stipends rather than a conventional wage or salary. As indicated above, the University of Massachusetts at Boston program leads many of its graduates into volunteer assignments or stipend positions.

Programs will vary in their specification of "mature adults" but they will serve people in a range of ages within the second half of the life cycle. Westchester, for example, seeks to serve those over 50 years of age; the Grand Rapids program is restricted to those over 55 years of age; the UMass/Boston program is open to all but primarily serves those over 60 years of age.

B. Strong ties to regional employers. Employment training -- including retraining -- is most likely to result in successful employment when it is linked to specific personnel needs of regional employers. A sensitivity to personnel shortages and to the skills needed by employers built into the design and administration of training programs will help to assure that training leads to jobs. As indicated above, the Westchester Customer Service program was developed in collaboration with an insurance company. Westchester's substitute teacher training program was also developed to meet the needs of a large school district in the county. The Grand Rapids furniture finishing course reflects demand from a local auto manufacturer for workers to finish wooden dashboards for luxury cars. Participating colleges should develop a capacity to analyze regional labor shortages, determine the training needs of employers, and communicate regularly with both large and small employers. Institutions must be guided by a broad perspective, one that enables them to project the needs of small employers who do not collectively do this. Training content should also be sufficiently generic so that trainees will be prepared for a range of employment opportunities. The

success of the UM/B graduates in finding diverse roles in a highly decentralized aging service/advocacy network testifies to the program's success in building widely applicable skills.

Programs should have the capacity to modify their offerings to meet emerging training needs. On short notice, they should be able to mount new training programs. Institutions should also be prepared to phase out programs for which there is declining demand.

C. Achievement expectations. Explicit performance objectives should be formulated to provide guidance in curriculum development and the assessment of student achievement. Some programs that develop advanced technical skills should be open only to those with the necessary prerequisites. Although courses should be designed so that the probability of successful learning is high, students should be required to demonstrate skills if they are to receive certificates. Emphasis on trainee achievement standards is important if programs are to gain credibility with employers. Each of the programs discussed here has explicit achievement expectations. Only those who meet performance objectives receive certificates.

D. Outreach and vocational counseling. Vigorous outreach should be provided to stimulate enrollment, particularly among those who have not recently participated in educational programs. Individual counseling should be provided prior to admission to assure that participants understand their options as well as likely employment opportunities, curriculum content, and performance expectations. In some instances, sensitive vocational counseling should be available for those who have lost high paid industrial jobs or managerial positions. Many of them cannot expect to regain their previous income levels even with retraining.

Grand Rapids places particular emphasis on outreach for student

recruitment. It has used a range of techniques including outreach workers, communication with church leaders, speeches to senior groups, contacts with senior centers and programs serving low-income people, newspaper ads and open houses. Westchester also uses various publicity measures but gets its best response from ads in a regional advertising circular. The UMass/Boston program easily fills available program slots between word-of-mouth recruitment by graduates and occasional feature articles in area newspapers.

Students who are unable to meet achievement expectations should be offered assistance in reassessing their options. Westchester places heavy emphasis on screening. Prospective students in the customer service program attend three sessions that offer information about the program and evaluate applicants for academic aptitude. Attendance at these three preliminary sessions is used also as a measure of motivation. Unsuccessful applicants are offered career counseling.

All students should be appraised of the opportunities and obstacles they are likely to encounter as older workers. They should be sensitized, for example, to age discrimination issues and the readjustments needed in reporting to younger supervisors and in working with younger coworkers. DeAnza College (CA) in its Older Adult Studies program addresses these problems directly by offering a course in Age Discrimination in Employment. Grand Rapids deliberately integrates older students into intergenerational classes that simulate what students can expect in the work place. At the same time, the Grand Rapids program works directly with older students to build self confidence and peer support.

E. Sensitivity to mature students. Programs should be organized to accommodate the needs of mature students. The emphasis should be on short-term training that leads quickly to jobs or to improved on-the-job performance. All of the programs illustrated here are of relatively short duration.

Westchester's customer service program is 14 weeks in length. Grand Rapids courses range in duration from 16 to 26 weeks. The UMass/Boston program requires two semesters.

Programs should be offered at times that are convenient for mature students. For those who are not employed, course offerings should be provided during day-time hours. For those who are employed, courses should be available outside of traditional working hours. Students in the UM/B program are on campus one day each week from 10 AM until 3:30 PM.

A special orientation is needed on the part of faculty. In recruiting faculty each of programs seeks individuals who are sensitive to older learners and orients new faculty regarding the special needs of older students. Both Westchester and UMass/Boston expect faculty to adjust to the diversity in background of students. Both programs enroll people who range in educational backgrounds from high school to post-graduate degrees. Westchester insists that instructors accommodate older learners be providing opportunities for them to progress at their own pace.

All of the programs substitute a competency approach to student assessment for the customary testing and grading systems. Students are given tasks they are expected to master. Students graduate from courses when they have realized the expected level of achievement.

Some of the special learning obstacles faced by mature students should be anticipated. Attention, for example, may be needed for some mature students with hearing or vision limitations. When necessary, tutoring should be provided in reading, writing, and mathematics. For those long removed from formal instruction, the need for such special assistance in adjusting to educational environments should be anticipated. UMass/Boston, for example, provides individual assistance in reading and writing when needed.

Programs should foster the mutual support that tends to develop among mature students through their interaction in educational programs. Older students both learn from one another and gain confidence through their interaction. The friendships developed in these programs can be important in sustaining the motivation of those experience difficulty with the academic work. Group projects can be particularly effective in encouraging formation of such bonds. Programs that integrate older learners in general classes can still encourage formation of mutual support groups among older learners by bringing them together for some special purposes. Both the Westchester and UMass/Boston programs have observed the formation of strong and positive bonds among older learners. In the UMass/Boston case, an active alumni association has emerged that is important as a social resource for students and a political force supporting the program.

F. Placement services. Assistance should be provided to help those successfully completing programs in finding suitable employment. In addition, programs should routinely follow up with both graduates and employers to determine their satisfaction with outcomes. Westchester provides career counseling and interviewing skills as part of its program. In addition, employers are invited to campus to interview graduates. In Grand Rapids, the senior employment programs conducts a job search/job placement seminar. The program also has job developers who assist in linking the program to strong employment opportunities.

Organization and Financing

To be effective, older worker training programs require strong leadership. All of the programs discussed here are located in a distinct administrative unit that focuses on education for older people. Riekse (1991) writing about his experiences in Grand Rapids underscores the importance of a program developer or coordinator to introduce a gerontological perspective and to mobilize the

resources necessary to conduct a program with the components outlined here. The UMass/Boston and Westchester programs both depend heavily on strong professional leadership and an administrative unit devoted to education of older people.

Some colleges will be able to offer all of the program components themselves. Other colleges will collaborate with outside organizations in mounting programs. Some colleges, for example, will concentrate on curriculum while other organizations carry responsibility for student outreach, vocational counseling, and placement. The Grand Rapids program, for example, is an explicit collaboration between a community college and a senior employment agency within an Area Agency on Aging. The latter carries particular responsibility for placement and job development. Westchester has developed two of its programs as collaborative efforts with local employers. The UM/B is free standing but works closely with local agencies in arranging field placements for students. Each year the program also carries out an action research project in collaboration with one or more aging organization. The program also has a long standing agreement with the local Catholic archdiocese to provide retraining for a number of older clergy.

All programs should be designed for permanence. Even in the early stages of program development, educational institutions should address questions of long-term financing. Programs should develop multiple sources of financing. Some programs will be able to obtain "hard" funding through their institution or through a legislative appropriation to cover core costs. Local industries are likely sources of financing for training programs that are tailored to their needs. Student tuition and fees should cover another portion of program costs. For programs designed to attract low-income students, it is essential that tuition and fees be kept to a minimum. To the extent that programs serve those with greater financial resources and promise to yield significant income gains, greater emphasis should be placed on covering costs through tuition and fees.

The UMass/Boston program began with a federal grant but has been able survive (and thrive) because it was able to obtain permanent state funding. Students over 60 take advantage of the State's tuition waiver program for older students in public higher education. In its formative period, Westchester was assisted in generating a strong program by a favorable state-aid formula. In addition, the customer service program has received special assistance through grants from its corporate sponsor. Grand Rapids has achieved stability by drawing steadily on the federal funds earmarked for retraining older workers. Reliance on that funding source, however, has set limits to the Grand Rapids program in the number of students served and the economic group served.

Conclusion

The rationale for development of older worker training programs in higher education is strong. The scattered programs that are currently underway demonstrate the viability and potential of these programs. In the coming decade as demand for older workers increases and the need for continuing worker retraining becomes more and more evident, educational programs that retrain older workers will become increasingly important. With a decline in enrollments among those of traditional college ages, institutions of higher education should be receptive to this new opportunity. In preparation for this emerging national economic need, a classic research and development strategy is needed. Demonstration funds are needed to encourage colleges to enter this field. Research funds are needed to better understand employer demand for retrained older workers, older worker receptivity to retraining and "delayed" retirement, and the effectiveness of retraining programs. Dissemination strategies are needed to synthesize emerging knowledge, to stimulate development lines of professional communication, and to educate both the general public and policy makers.

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